Because writing teachers invest so much time responding to student writing and because these responses reveal the assumptions teachers hold about writing, L1 writing researchers have investigated how composition teachers respond to their students' texts. These investigations have revealed that teachers respond to most writing as if it were a final draft, thus reinforcing an extremely constricted notion of composing. Their comments often reflect the application of a single ideal standard rather than criteria that take into account how composing constraints can affect writing performance. Furthermore, teachers' marks and comments usually take the form of abstract and vague prescriptions and directives that students find difficult to interpret.

A study was undertaken to examine ESL teachers' responses to student writing. The findings suggest that ESL composition teachers make similar types of comments and are even more concerned with language-specific errors and problems. The marks and comments are often confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible. In addition, ESL teachers, like their native-language counterparts, rarely seem to expect students to revise the text beyond the surface level.

Such responses to texts give students a very limited and limiting notion of writing, for they fail to provide students with the understanding that writing involves producing a text that evolves over time. Teachers therefore need to develop more appropriate responses for commenting on student writing. They need to facilitate revision by responding to writing as work in progress rather than judging it as a finished product.

The following description, entitled "Portrait of the English Teacher as a Tired Dog," appears in a recent reference work for teachers of writing:

It is a November midnight, Johnny Carson has just ended, and throughout the block the last lights flick off—all but one that is. A single orange light blooms in the darkness. It is the English teacher, weary-eyed, cramped of leg, hand, and brain, sifting listlessly, but doggedly through piles of themes, circling, marking, grading, commenting, guilt-
ridden because the students were promised that the papers would be returned last week. The fifth cup of coffee grows cold and bitter. Just one more paper. And then one more. And then . . . (Judy 1981:208).

That writing teachers spend a great deal of time responding to their students' papers is a truism. According to one estimate (Sommers 1982), teachers take at least 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual paper. While little data of this sort exist for ESL teachers of writing,1 anecdotal evidence suggests that we too invest a great proportion of our instructional time responding to our students' compositions.

TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING: L1 SETTINGS

Given the fact that writing teachers believe, by virtue of the time and effort invested, that their responses provide critical information to students about their writing performance, it is interesting to note that until very recently, little attention was paid to the nature of these responses. Recently, however, attempts have been made to describe and investigate teachers' responses to student writing, since these responses are believed to reflect underlying assumptions about the nature and function of writing. As two researchers recently put it:

The attitudes that teachers have toward writing strongly influence their own teaching practices, particularly their evaluation of student writing. Their beliefs . . . serve as filters that train their attention to qualities (or lack thereof) in student writing (Beach and Bridwell 1984:312).

These investigations reveal that despite the findings of process-oriented studies and their implications for the teaching of writing, practice lags far behind research and theory (see, for example, Young 1978, M. Rose 1981, Hairston 1982, Burhans 1983, Friedmann 1983) and that this is especially the case for teachers' responses. Sommers' (1982) study, for example, of teachers' comments—comments that were "intended to motivate revision"—indicates that they "take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers' purpose in commenting" (149). According to Murray, "we want our students to perform to the standards of other students, to study what we plan for them to study and to learn from it what we or our teachers learned" (1984:7). As a result, students revise according to the changes that teachers impose on the text.

1 See, however, Cumming (1983), whose analysis of the think-aloud protocols of three ESL teachers revealed that two of these teachers spent approximately 40 minutes responding to an ESL text.
Other researchers have studied the ways in which teachers appropriate their students' writing by establishing themselves as authorities. Teachers have been found to apply uniform, inflexible standards to their students' texts and to respond according to the extent to which these texts conform to or deviate from these standards (Moran 1981). They have been found to pre-empt control of important decision-making processes, allowing their own "ideal texts to dictate choices that properly belong to writers" (Brannon and Knoblauch 1982:159). Students are thus given to understand that what they wanted to say is not as important as what their teachers wanted them to say. Furthermore, these "ideal texts" may interfere with the teachers' ability to read and interpret texts, with the result that texts may be misread and comments and reactions may be inaccurate, misleading, or inappropriate (Greenbaum and Taylor 1981, Sommers 1982). In the face of their teachers' critical judgments, students are unlikely to make any effort to establish that their meaning has been misconstrued; "the writer avoids or alters meaning rather than risk [the teacher's] disapproval" (Schwartz 1983:556).

When teachers appropriate writing in this way, they are obviously viewing texts as products to be judged and evaluated. Their responses, therefore, do not take into account "the writer's intention and the actual playing out of that intention in the process of composing" or the "writer's relation to audience in any full way" (M. Rose 1983:116). Thus, the changes and revisions that students incorporate not only may fail to clarify what they intended to communicate but may have little to do with what was originally intended (see, for example, Brannon and Knoblauch 1982, Freedman 1984, Ziv 1984).

That texts are viewed as fixed and final products is further corroborated by the overwhelming evidence that teachers attend to surface-level features in what should otherwise be considered first drafts (see, for example, Collins 1981, Moran 1981, Murray 1982, Sommers 1982). Teachers seemingly "find it difficult to respond to student writing unless they can respond to it as a final draft" (Butturff and Sommers 1980:99-100) and therefore focus on problems of mechanics, usage, and style. Responding in this way to local concerns creates in students a rather limited notion of composing and reinforces the understanding that these concerns must be dealt with at the outset. I use the word reinforces here because studies of revising strategies indicate that it is surface-level features of writing that inexperienced writers attend to (see, for example, Beach 1976, Sommers 1980, Faigley and Witte 1981, Rubin 1983, Witte 1983). As Flower and Hayes put it, these writers are "locked in by the myopia" of their "low level goals" (1981:379).
This is not to say that teachers in fact do not believe that certain features of writing are more important than others (see, for example, Griffin 1982), but that the impression their responses create is that local errors are either as important as, if not more important than, meaning-related concerns. And this is the impression that stays with students. For example, in a recent study by Schwartz (1984), students were asked to indicate which passage a professor would prefer: one that was clear but lifeless or one that was colorful and creative but flawed mechanically. Students chose the first, assuming that “grammatical errors are more powerful in effect than voice” (60).

Because teachers often address both minor infelicities and larger issues of rhetoric and content in the same version of a text, their responses are frequently contradictory; while interlinear comments address the text as a finished product to be edited, marginal comments view the text as still developing and evolving (Sommers 1982:151). For example, mechanical errors might be pinpointed at the same time that students are being asked to elaborate upon an idea or make it more interesting. Students who receive mixed messages of this kind may be confused because they have no way of knowing whether to focus on the meaning-level changes suggested or the local problems pinpointed. Furthermore, they may recognize—although the teacher seemingly does not—that additional clarification may obviate the necessity of making these local changes. But students typically do not have to resolve this conflict, for although instructors suggest revision, they paradoxically do not provide for further revision or require it (Johnson 1979). As one researcher has indicated, students may read the comments on their papers, but they rarely write “subsequent drafts in which they can act upon the comments, and thus the improvements desired by their teachers rarely occur” (Ziv 1984:362).

Students are further likely to be confused by the contradictory ways in which different teachers respond. Teachers apply very different and even conflicting standards, based on different experiences, orientations, expectations, preconceptions, and biases (see, for example, Griffin 1982, Siegel 1982, Purves 1984). This variation in teachers’ responses is confirmed by a number of investigations (Hake 1978, Harris 1979). Schwartz (1984) found that when two pieces of discourse are read by two different readers, the very text that pleases one reader may irritate the other. Another recent study (Freedman 1984) found that teachers’ expectations of and assumptions about student writing determine their responses to student writing. Even teachers’ anxiety about their own ability to write may be a contributing factor to the way teachers respond to students’ texts (Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott 1984). Williams’ (1981) study
of standards of evaluation indicates that conflicting and contradictory standards are as evident in handbooks and grammar texts as they are in teachers' responses. Given the variation in teachers' responses and the tendency of textbooks to reinforce or even promote this variation, it is no wonder that teachers' responses have been found to be "idiosyncratic" and "arbitrary" (Sommers 1982:149).

Another major finding is that most teachers' comments are not "text-specific and could be interchanged from text to text" (Sommers 1982:152). Instead of specific strategies, questions, and suggestions that might help students reshape their texts, students are given vague prescriptive advice (see, for example, Butturff and Sommers 1980, E. Miller 1982, G. Smith 1982, Winterowd 1983)—perhaps because, as one trainer of writing teachers has suggested, teachers are not capable of doing "accurate or creative diagnoses of student writing" (Moran 1981:70). These vague prescriptions take the form of marks and comments that represent "complex meanings . . . which remain locked in [the teacher's] head" (Butler 1980:270). While teachers may assume that these prescriptions have "universally-accepted definitions" that transmit the same "values" to their students, this is not the case (Schwartz 1984). As one study (Ziv 1984) has indicated, when cues remain implicit, whether at the conceptual, structural, or sentential level, these responses are often misunderstood, misinterpreted, and unhelpful to students in their efforts to rethink the problems being addressed.

TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING: L2 SETTINGS

For the same reasons that researchers are exploring the ways in which teachers respond to student writing in L1 settings—to discover both the kinds of responses they make and the underlying assumptions about writing that these responses reflect—we should be investigating the responses of ESL writing teachers. Studies of teachers' responses in L2 settings (of the sort carried out by Brannon and Knoblauch 1982, Siegel 1982, Sommers 1982, and Schwartz 1984) are practically nonexistent.

This is not to say, however, that ESL teachers have no guidelines to follow when responding to student writing. On the contrary, a descriptive survey (Cumming 1983) of responding procedures outlines the techniques and practices that have been recommended to ESL professionals and that are "seemingly implemented on a regular basis" (2) by these teachers. The following illustrates one such recommendation:
Error correction is crucial for learning the writing skill, and correction techniques are essentially the same for controlled and free composition. Using a set list of correction symbols, teachers indicate student errors focusing on the teaching point and previously learned patterns (Bruder and Furey 1979:71).

It is obvious from the survey that despite the recent influence of process-oriented research (see, for example, Taylor 1981, Zamel 1982, 1983, Raimes 1983, Spack and Sadow 1983), teachers are still by and large concerned with the accuracy and correctness of surface-level features of writing and that error identification—the practice of searching for and calling attention to error—is still the most widely employed procedure for responding to ESL writing. Cumming offers the following rationale for this almost obsessive preoccupation with error:

Error-identification appears to be ingrained in the habitual practices of second language teachers who perhaps by reason of perceiving their role solely as instructors of the formal aspects of "language" therefore restrict their activities to operations exclusively within the domain of formal training rather than that of cognitive development (1983:6).

Current research tells us very little about ESL teachers' responses to student writing. We know that teachers respond imprecisely and inconsistently to errors (Hendrickson 1980). Experimental studies have been undertaken to determine whether certain correction strategies seem to be more effective than others (see, for example, Cardelle and Corno 1981, Chaudron 1983, Cohen 1983, Robb, Ross, and Shortreed 1984). While studies of this sort help us explore the effects of certain feedback treatments, they clearly do not increase our understanding of what teachers actually do in response to their students' written texts.

One investigation (Vann, Meyer, and Lorenz 1984) that attempted to determine how teachers respond to ESL writing examined the responses of university faculty from various academic disciplines. Unfortunately, the texts evaluated consisted of isolated sentences containing typical ESL errors rather than total units of discourse. Thus, while the findings of this study—particularly those that indicate that variables such as age and academic area seem to influence how faculty react to certain errors—are intriguing, responding to errors in sentences out of context is so unlike what professors typically do that the findings probably bear little relationship to real responding behavior.²

² My own exploratory examination of how university faculty respond to ESL writing raises additional questions about the Vann, Meyer, and Lorenz (1984) study and its findings. My analysis indicates that faculty do not react according to some hierarchy of error types. Rather, they apply certain modes of responding: reacting to all errors, reacting to very few errors, reacting to only some errors, etc.
One recent study (Cumming 1983) does provide insight into how ESL teachers respond to student writing. An examination of these teachers' responses to the same student paper suggests that error identification is in fact the most widely employed technique, that teachers' responses to the same text differ, and that the application of error-identification techniques varies considerably. Analysis of the think-aloud protocols of three of the teachers provides other interesting data. For example, particular responding techniques seem to affect how teachers view and react to the text. It is not surprising, given these differences, that these teachers "differ[ed] markedly in their assessments" (21) of the written text. This study certainly begins to ask the right question about ESL teachers' responses and provides revealing data. However, as in other experimental studies, the teachers were responding within a context created by the researcher. They may have been influenced not only by what they thought the researcher was looking for, particularly as they thought aloud about their responding processes, but by the very act of responding aloud. Thus, the extent to which their responses represent their actual reactions to and comments about authentic texts in real instructional settings cannot be determined.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Given the limitations of previous studies of ESL teachers' responses to student writing, I set out to investigate actual teacher responses. I examined the comments, reactions, and markings that appeared on compositions assigned and evaluated by teachers in their own university-level ESL writing classes. It should be noted that these compositions were originally collected to establish files of student writing, not to study teachers' responses. Thus, it is unlikely that the teachers' responses were influenced by the artificial conditions prevailing in an experimental situation.

The responding behaviors of 15 teachers were analyzed. In all but three cases, I was able to examine the way each of these teachers responded to three or more students, and in most cases there were at least two different papers for each student. Altogether, I studied 105 student texts, not including revisions of the same text. Since each teacher responded to different students and the different papers they each wrote, I was satisfied that the responses were in fact representative of these teachers' responding behavior.
The findings are consistent with much of what has been found about the responses of L1 writing teachers. ESL writing teachers misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text.

What is particularly striking about these ESL teachers' responses, however, is that the teachers overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers; they attend primarily to surface-level features of writing and seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate sentences or even clauses, rather than as a whole unit of discourse. They are in fact so distracted by language-related local problems that they often correct these without realizing that a much larger meaning-related problem has totally escaped their notice. Williams describes the phenomenon this way:

> It is the difference between reading for typographical errors and reading for content. When we read for typos, letters constitute the field of attention; content becomes virtually inaccessible. When we read for content, semantic structures constitute the field of attention; letters—for the most part—recede from our consciousness (1981:154).

Let us now look at specific responses:

1. I work at a office. At work everyone to do their job but we also socialize with each other. There are moments when you think everything is going wrong and nobody care about you. One moment you are really down, they come up with some action that really surprises you. They really show a great deal of human love, charity and helping hands.

Note in particular the changes made in the fourth sentence of this text. The teacher has misread the text, for he has failed to recognize that does for this particular student is the graphic representation of those, a fact which I discovered when the student read the paper aloud. In addition to appropriating the text in this way, the incorporated changes make the text less coherent than the student's own version. The student's intention was to say "on those moments," which refers directly to the preceding sentence.
In Example 2, we see a similar misinterpretation of a text:

2. I asked him why didn’t you return the extra change back to her. He said no. Why should I, I said because you should be honest. He answered honest for what? for money I said yes. He answered I’ll be honest for something else but not for money. I was so shocked and surprised by his answer that I didn’t tell him anything else. He kept his money and became my enemy that was a lesson to me. I tough thought pre how money could change someone’s personality and honesty. In a second, All I did was wish that my friends couldn’t act the same way in a similar situation.

Notice that the teacher in this case had some clue about the student’s intention. By looking at the student’s own crossed-out spelling in the parentheses in the third to the last line, one can see that he was trying to say, “It taught me.” But the teacher read the word thought and changed the surrounding context so that it would accommodate this misread word. As a result, the text becomes less coherent than it originally was.

When teachers misread the text, their recommendations or corrections are often imprecise or inaccurate:

3. Sharing the same concern, Phillipa Strum in “Women at Work: Is Discrimination Real?” said that even there has been the Equal Rights Amendment, Discrimination Against women at work regardless of age still exists in the U.S.A.

4. But much of the American parents’ teachings was towards making their children become good Americans and believe in the value of work and build up their self-confidence in order for them in later years, to challenge different situations and to be successful. Especially, they wanted their children to understand that the upward mobility was believed to be accomplished through an individual’s hard work.
In Example 3, rewording the underlined phrase does not deal appropriately with the grammatical problem. In Example 4, the addition of if establishes a different relationship between the last two sentences and creates a structural error.

In responding to student texts, teachers often attend to local concerns and are seemingly unaffected by the larger, meaning-related problems:

5. The result was that there was no significant differences among the groups on measures of emotional adjustment, delinquency, I.Q., visual-motor coordination, and academic performance. Not only had no significant differences, but also the children who took stimula for many years their heart rate increased and blood pressure, too.

6. I'm afraid of being immersed in water. For instance when I go to the beach I don't go far away in the water. This is the way to describe my particular fear of water. However, essential and dangerous are two best words to describe how water is good for life and at the same time it is also dangerous. How could I explain to people that I am afraid of water since I was when I was 5 years old.

Note how the teacher's focus at the end of Example 5 results in his missing the illogical relationship between the two sentences. In Example 6, the teacher fails to address the problematical nature of this paragraph and focuses instead on issues of lesser concern.

Because teachers commonly respond to certain problems but not others, their reactions seem arbitrary and idiosyncratic. This indicates that some things catch the teacher's attention while others do not or that errors most easily dealt with are the ones identified.³

³ I am well aware of the argument that responses cannot be characterized as arbitrary without taking into account the context of the instruction and that these responses may have been deliberate and purposeful. However, an examination of students' entire texts reveals such inconsistent reactions to the same types of problems in the same text that these responses appear far more arbitrary than intentional.
7. Television is very popular among children, and these days children cannot live without it. However, it is a big controversy whether TV can have a good influence on children or not.

Television can help to socialize children without any effort. They can learn from television what is good and what is bad from them to do. Also they can learn from television easily the things which they cannot see or touch directly. Those things are lives of animals and lives of different country's children. However, there are some arguments that television gives negative influence on children. Parents sometimes give television to children instead of playing with them as it is easier way to make children calm.

In this example, one is struck by both the language items corrected and those left uncorrected. Why, for example, is the verb changed from give to have, while the larger grammatical problem is not addressed? Does the sentence read better as a result of the changed verb? Do any of these corrections illustrate an underlying assumption that certain errors need attending to before others?

In addition to reacting idiosyncratically to textual problems, teachers often provide vague and abstract responses that do not enable students to revise their texts. Comments like "What do you mean?" "Word Form," "Wrong word," "Can you say this more concisely?" or "Be careful with run-ons" appear repeatedly; revisions of the same text, however, indicate that such comments are of little help to the student, as is readily apparent from Examples 8 to 11:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Revision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. There is a final step that the bride has to make. She has to go back to visit her family three days after she get marry also must eat the rice cooked the day before.</td>
<td>There is a final step that the bride has to make. She has to go back to visit her family three days after she get marry additional, she must eat the overnight rice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. All the apartments built with new styles were perfectly gorgeous and magnificent. It was unbelievable that when I visited New York City. It was in a terrible condition.

10. The foreman walked with a limp. He walked through the plant limping like a broken man over his prime. His face looked like it never seen laughter. He was big from head to toe. He looked like a bear.

11. At that time, I was baffled by the beautiful scenery helplessness with happiness yet in the firm grasp of some sustaining power because it seemed very short as a trip for only two days. I feel that I have a unique feeling of this significant holiday.
These examples are revealing, since the intent of these teachers' responses is ostensibly to draw students' attention to and help them understand their problems and how to revise their texts effectively.

While it is obvious that all of these examples illustrate teachers' responses to shorter pieces of text, the responses in fact reflect how teachers respond to whole texts. ESL teachers, viewing their students as language learners rather than developing writers, treat students' texts as final products to be edited.

This is not to say, however, that ESL teachers do not address issues of content and organization as well. Most of the texts that I examined indicate that they do. Since most first drafts were seemingly read as final drafts, however, students did not have to take responsibility for addressing these important features of writing. Furthermore, since teachers' comments about these larger concerns were couched in the same sort of vague and abstract terms used for localized errors, it is unlikely that students could have made substantial revisions, even if they had been required to do so.

The following comments are typical of how teachers dealt with content-related and organizational problems:

Organization O.K. However, you did not understand the topic you were assigned. I cannot understand a lot of what you are saying.

What are your subtopics? Make them explicit in your introduction and make sure your paragraphs elaborate on them.

Although you have an introduction, developing sentences and conclusion, there's no clear T.S., nor do individual sentences clearly relate.

This is a really excellent narrative but I do not really see any description here. You also have some other compositional changes to make in sentence, paragraph formation.

Well-organized and well-developed in most cases, but the last point isn't well discussed.

Interesting examples and observations about people. A few unclear ideas and references, however.

Getting away from Topic
A few confusing parts

You need to support your opinion by giving details and you need to organize your thoughts a little better.

The argument remains a little superficial.

I'd like to see a general introduction, something to interest your reader.

This is well-organized, but some of your paragraphs need developing.

Some of your statements are so general that I don't know what you mean.
This last comment ironically underscores the fact that we are not very good models for our students, for while we fault them for being too general and imprecise, we are just as vague when we attempt to communicate with them.

Obviously, responses like these do not provide students with clear and explicit strategies for revising the text. They are not content-specific and could easily be appended to any student text. Rarely was a question asked or a suggestion made that gave students real direction. Rarely did a comment indicate a reaction to the actual ideas and content presented. When such comments did appear, they were perceptibly different and clearly demonstrated what happens when one reads and interacts with the text instead of evaluating it. For example, in response to a student’s unsuccessful attempt to explain the effects of the energy crisis, a teacher remarked:

The question is not “Are these energy sources decreasing?” but “How will the energy crisis change our modern life style?” You will need to be a lot more specific in your composition. See if you can answer the following question: How will the energy crisis affect agricultural production, industry and personal comfort?

Or, in response to a student’s rather limited composition on the changing American family, this same teacher offered the following:

So far you have only told me your opinion; you haven’t told me why you believe what you do. You need to tell me what social, political and economic factors are putting pressure on the family to change. You stop just when it’s getting interesting!

It is obvious from these responses that the teacher expected these texts to be revised in a dramatic and substantial way. One should also note that the numerous surface-level errors in these texts were not dealt with at all; this challenges the belief, illustrated in the following response of another teacher, that meaning cannot or should not be addressed when texts show signs of faulty grammar:

If people can’t understand you, it doesn’t help to have some very intelligent or interesting ideas. I am not saying that you do not work hard enough—I know that you do—but rather to let you know you have a problem. When you rewrite this, I want you to concentrate on the language only. Don’t even try to change or improve the content. Try to learn from rewriting how you should express your ideas in clearer and more correct language.

Compared with the two previous responses, this teacher’s response communicates to the student a very different notion of what revising entails and what is important in writing.

The vague commentary of teachers often reflects the assumption that learning to write depends upon the application and mastery of
rules and prescriptions. One response in particular demonstrates the extent to which the application of these formulaic guidelines interferes with a genuine reading of student writing. Reacting to a student’s text, the teacher writes:

What is this? Is this free writing? If not, where is your free writing? If this is a paragraph, there should be five sentences here.

Furthermore, teachers’ responses reveal remarkable contradictions:

You show a deep theoretical understanding of the problem but you need more detail.

You explain this quite nicely. It’s clear why you liked it although you could have analyzed its appeal more deeply.

Very well thought out and well-written although the first body paragraph is better than the other two.

While these comments illustrate messages that are internally contradictory, there are larger contradictions as well, similar to those that Sommers (1982) identified in her study. At the same time that teachers addressed major issues of content and development in the responses that sometimes appeared in the margin, but primarily at the end of a text, they worked at polishing the text by identifying, reacting to, or correcting errors. It has apparently not occurred to these teachers that the major revisions suggested and the interlinear responses are at odds with one another. In the face of these incongruous types of comments, students are not likely to know which type of response deserves a higher priority.

From the revisions that I examined, it is quite obvious that the marginal and end comments notwithstanding, students revise on the basis of local corrections and that teachers approve of and accept these superficially better texts. For example, in response to one student’s composition, a teacher suggested that one of the paragraphs be developed further and even provided some specific questions to consider. The revision, however, incorporated the teacher’s grammatical corrections and did not address the questions at all. The response to the second draft: “Good! Almost error-free! Very good in organization and development!” Despite our best intentions, our responses communicate conflicting and constricting notions about the nature of writing.

This dilemma was captured well by one teacher, a student in one of my graduate courses, whom I encouraged to study her own responding behaviors:

Whenever ESL writing students have turned in their compositions to me, I have felt a rush of mixed emotions: excitement at the prospect of reading their ideas, but at the same time utter dread of the monumental
task of dealing with all those errors! I usually start out with good intentions of focusing primarily on the students' message and attending to only the "most important" errors; but all too often, I end up plowing through each paper, systematically circling, crossing out, putting brackets around, and/or revising every usage error I find. A few days later, the students get back a paper "of a different color [ink] from what they originally wrote," (according to my Vietnamese students). They read through the corrected paper once, (if I'm lucky), making mental note of the errors, (with or without understanding; to be filed in short-term memory), and then put away (or throw away?) that completed venture, ready to try their luck again at the next assignment.

She then poses the question, "Is anything really gained by the experience?" Her own answer to this question, after she examined both her responses and their effect on student writing, was an unqualified no. This corroborates the findings of other research, which makes clear the insignificant effects of teachers' responses (see, for example, Butturff and Sommers 1980, Haswell 1983, Carroll 1984, Ziv 1984).

IMPLICATIONS

We all have the opportunity to study our own responding behaviors. Each of us can become a researcher, or more accurately, an ethnographer, and analyze the rich data available to us. For example, we can try to keep logs of the types of responses we make and the degree to which these responses are incorporated into student revisions. If we are not asking for revisions, this of course tells us something as well. Just as we ask students to reread their writing, we can reread our responses and see whether they make as much sense to us as they did when we wrote them. We can ask students to tell us whether or not they understand our responses and to indicate those that they do not. In this way we can better understand what we are asking students to do, what students are learning (both about the specific point addressed and about the writing process in general), and the extent to which this enterprise helps students develop as writers.4

We are likely to discover, as a result of such self-exploration, that we need to change our responding behavior so that students can better understand how to revise their writing. We must recognize that students may not be able to use our comments and markings,

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4 In addition to investigating teachers' responses and how these responses affect student writing within real instructional settings, we need to examine the context for these responses. In this way we can begin to understand how instruction and responses reinforce one another.
for our responses may represent very complex reactions which they are incapable of applying to their texts. Therefore, we need to replace vague commentary and references to abstract rules and principles with text-specific strategies, directions, guidelines, and recommendations. Responses of this sort reveal to the writer the confusion that the reader may have experienced and make obvious how to deal with these problems.

Offering text-specific comments and reactions means that instead of a single standard for evaluating a text, we must adopt a flexible standard that takes into account the constraints of the tasks. Rather than a concern with whether or not a particular form was applied to the construction of the text, the concern is with the communicative effectiveness of the text (Brannon and Knoblauch 1982, Siegel 1982). Thus, the questions that we raise in responding to a text can better address the crucial dimensions of composing: for example, the author’s intention and the audience.

Furthermore, applying a flexible rather than an absolute standard reminds us that the cognitive demands of a task determine what students produce on paper. Attempting to deal with intellectually complex and demanding writing assignments may result in breakdowns or setbacks that may not be evident in other kinds of writing (Clark 1980, Freedman and Pringle 1980, S. Miller 1980). To respond to these breakdowns and setbacks without taking into account the writing contexts undermines students’ efforts to deal with challenging composing tasks. Responding in such a way reflects the notion that composing is a matter of writing texts that conform to the models and paradigms imposed by the teacher or textbook. As a result of such responses, students are less likely to take the kinds of risks necessary for their development as writers.

It is not enough, however, to respond more specifically and substantively or to employ more flexible criteria. Students must be provided the time and opportunity to apply these criteria and incorporate these responses into their texts. They must be made to understand that texts evolve, that revision is to be taken literally as a process of re-seeing one’s text, and that this re-seeing is an integral and recursive aspect of writing. Thus, rather than responding to texts as fixed and final products, we should be leading students through the “cycles of revision” (Butturff and Summers 1980:103), for evaluating work while it may conceivably be changed “interferes with, or ends, any sense of work in progress” (S. Miller 1982: 181). By providing assistance before an essay is considered finished, we are facilitating more writing and reinforcing the idea that continual clarification and exploration may be necessary before one’s meaning becomes articulated. As Sommers puts it:
We need to sabotage our students' conviction that the drafts they have written are completed and coherent. Our comments need to offer students revision tasks . . . by forcing students back into chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning (1982:154).

Furthermore, we need to establish priorities in our responses to drafts and subsequent revisions and encourage students to address certain concerns before others. As Purves (1984) suggests, we need to play a whole range of roles as readers of student writing and adopt those that are appropriate for the various stages of a developing text. By probing, challenging, raising questions, and pinpointing ambiguities, we can help students understand that meaning-level issues are to be addressed first. This understanding is especially crucial in the ESL writing classroom, where students may be convinced that accuracy and correctness are of primary importance and where, because of their concern with language and their inexperience with writing, they may be trying to attend to all of the various demands of composing simultaneously.

We need to realize that what is true for language acquisition, as we understand it from Krashen (1982), also applies to learning to write: Monitoring student output while that output is in the process of developing may not only be unproductive, but may inhibit further development (Winterowd 1980, Pringle 1983). Thus, we need to refrain from reading texts the way most of us currently do. We should hold in abeyance our reflex-like reactions to surface-level concerns and give priority to meaning, for "by worrying about mistakes in writing before we have helped students with the more important problem of adequately representing meaning . . . we may be teaching students to do the same" (Collins 1981:202). By reading primarily for error, instead of responding to the substance of students' writing, we create a situation in which genuine change even at the more superficial level is unlikely:

To insist only on technical propriety is to underestimate [the] power [of composing] as a heuristic . . . Conversely, to accentuate the role of composing in discovering new knowledge is to show students why their writing matters, therefore to increase their motivation to write, and therefore, ultimately, to increase the likelihood of improvement because they have become more aware of the purpose and value of making meaning (Knoblauch and Brannon 1983:468).

To respond by participating in the making of meaning means that we no longer present ourselves as authorities but act instead as consultants, assistants, and facilitators. Thus, rather than making assumptions about the text, taking control of it, and offering judgmental commentary that "unbalances the teacher-student equi-
librium in an authentic learning situation” (Haswell 1983:600), we need to establish a collaborative relationship with our students, drawing attention to problems, offering alternatives, and suggesting possibilities. In this sort of relationship, student and teacher can exchange information about what the writer is trying to communicate and the effect that this communication has had upon the reader and can “negotiate ways to bring actual effect as closely in line with desired intention as possible” (Brannon and Knoblauch 1982:162).

This dynamic interchange and negotiation is most likely to take place when writers and readers work together face-to-face (see, for example, Berthoff 1980, Beach 1982, Murray 1982, A. Rose 1982, Spear 1982). Instead of limiting our responses to written comments and reactions, which by their very nature are “disembodied remarks” (Sommers 1982:155) that proceed in only one direction, we should set up collaborative sessions and conferences during which important discoveries can be made by both reader and writer. The reader can discover the underlying meaning and logic of what may appear to be an incoherent text and instruct the writer how to reshape, modify, and transform the text; the writer can simultaneously discover what lies behind and motivates the complex reactions of the reader and help the reader understand a text that up to this point may have been ambiguous, elusive, or unintelligible.

In light of what we can learn from and teach each other during this reciprocal, dialectical process, we should all begin to re-examine our typical approaches to responding to writing and attempt to teach, as Murray puts it, “where the student is, not where the teacher wishes the student was” (1982:144). We should consider how we can respond as genuine and interested readers rather than as judges and evaluators. We should try to respond not to secretaries, but to authors, a distinction that F. Smith (1983) draws between the act of proofreading transcriptions of our own texts and that of reading original texts created by others. What all of this means, then, is that we should respond not so much to student writing but to student writers.
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